

Grieving the Loss of a Pet

Anyone who considers a pet a beloved friend, companion or family member knows that losing a pet can be intensely painful. To make it worse, the grief of a pet owner is often minimized by responses such as: "Why don't you just get another pet?" It is important to know that grieving the loss of a pet is normal and natural. Your feelings are not silly or crazy.

Why are the feelings so painful? 🐾

- ❖ The death of a pet is the loss of unconditional love that few humans can provide for us. Pets don't judge us for our imperfections and easily forgive our transgressions.
- ❖ Being a pet owner is similar to being a parent. The loss of the role of caretaker hurts and can leave us feeling lost and empty.
- ❖ Pets allow us to express parts of ourselves that we may never let other humans see. They may have been there for us through changes and upheavals, and thus signify stability and comfort.
- ❖ For some people, their pet was their main source of companionship and so the loss is even more devastating.



Other factors that make grief more complicated: 🐾

- ❖ **GUILT**- You may question if you did enough to care for your pet medically. Or you may wonder if you had made a different decision, that the outcome may have been different. If we are unsure whether all options were exhausted, then residual guilt may hinder us from effectively moving through grief. Some of us lack the financial resources to do life saving medical treatment and this can be hard to bear.
- ❖ **EUTHANASIA** – Making the decision to end your pet's life can be excruciating. When you are present during your pet's final moments, the memory can be overwhelming. If you are left with uncertainty as to whether this was the "right time", this doubt can make grieving more difficult.
- ❖ **MESSAGES or pressure to "Get over it"** – We may push our grief aside because we tell ourselves or someone else tells us we should be "done by now". This ultimately delays the healing process. Your grief takes as long as it takes. There is no right or wrong time frame.
- ❖ **CIRCUMSTANCES surrounding the loss** – If our pet died in a manner that we feel could have been avoided, we may experience recurring negative thoughts towards ourselves or others.

Steps to help you through the grieving process: 🐾

- ❖ Feel and express your feelings. Be patient and kind to yourself as you grieve.
- ❖ Find at least one ally, a safe person to talk to, who understands what you are experiencing.
- ❖ Attend a support group. In the Omaha area, Paws to Angels and the Nebraska Humane Society offer support groups. For online support, go to www.petloss.com. The website has a message board and chat room.
- ❖ Commemorate the death of your pet. Create a ceremony to say goodbye and invite those closest to you. Write your pet a letter thanking him or her for being a part of your life. Take a special walk or hike, as many times as you need, in memory of your pet. Make a memory board or scrapbook with pictures and stories.



If you are struggling with the loss of a pet or any other personal or workplace issues, please call **Alegent Creighton Health EAP** at 402-398-5566 or 1-888-847-4975.